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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HO CHI MINH CITY 000673

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOVI](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [VM](#) [HUMANR](#) [RELFREE](#)

SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM MAKES SLOW PROGRESS IN HUE

REF: A) Hanoi 916 B) HCMC 76

Summary

1. (SBU) Both religious leaders and government officials in Thua Thien-Hue Province expressed a generally positive outlook on religious freedom during recent official meetings. However, Embassy and Consulate General officers were prevented from making unannounced visits to dissident Buddhist and Catholic clerics by apparent police measures (ref A). In discussions with both Catholic and Protestant leaders, Missionoffs noted a willingness to compromise with provincial officials in order to achieve specific goals. This seems to have yielded some positive results, although obstacles remain. End Summary.

Official View - No One Should Abuse Religious Freedom

2. (SBU) Meeting with Hanoi poloff and HCMC conoff during their March 29-31 trip to Hue, Mr. Le Ba Hoang, Deputy Director of the provincial Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) underscored freedom of religion guarantees under Article 17 of the Vietnamese Constitution. But, he cautioned, no one has the right to abuse freedom of religion. Mr. Hoang gave an overview of the scope and variety of believers in the province. The largest group is the Buddhists, whose 550,000 believers comprise about half the population of the province. A total of 1400 religious staff, including 764 monks and 162 nuns, administered some 454 pagodas, although Hoang said his definition of pagoda included some very simple places of worship. The Senior Buddhist Seminary in Hue -- opened in 1997 -- graduates 200 students per class with the equivalent of a Bachelor of Arts in Buddhism, some of whom later go on to higher study overseas. Moreover, the last ten years have seen four "designation" ceremonies, in which more than 400 members were selected to be trained for leadership roles within the Buddhist hierarchy.

3. (SBU) Responding to inquiries about Hue's most prominent activist monk -- Thich Thien Hanh, of the outlawed United Buddhist Church of Vietnam -- Hoang's stance was unequivocal. Thich Thien Hanh had been a member of the provincial management board of Vietnam from 1981 until 1992, Hoang said, and his 1992 resignation was an "internal Buddhist matter." Since then, Thich Thien Hanh had been a "subversive presence." Hoang called the UBCV a "splinter group, intending to spread propaganda against the government." When asked if missionoffs might meet with Thich Thien Hanh, Mr. Hoang stated that we did not request to see him, and so it had not been arranged, but that in any case, "seeing him would do no good for Buddhism." When asked to clarify this, Mr. Hoang replied with a Vietnamese proverb: "A monk without a robe is not a monk; a person with a robe might not be a monk." (Note: Officers had attempted to meet with Thich Thien Hanh the day before, but were blocked by police action. Generally speaking, Mission informs provincial authorities of meetings with GVN officials, but not of plans to meet with private individuals including religious leaders. End Note.)

4. (U) The Catholic Church is comparatively small, with four dioceses ministering to 52,000 believers, according to Hoang. There are 99 priests and 531 monks and nuns serving 104 churches within the region. Both Mr. Hoang and Hue Archbishop Nguyen Nhu The noted the Catholic Seminary in Hue -- reopened in 1994 -- trains priests to serve in 3 provinces: Thua Thien-Hue, Da Nang, and Kon Tum. Hoang claimed that seminary staff alone decided who was to be admitted for study, but Archbishop The stated there was an unofficial government "quota" of 10 students for each area, leading to class sizes of 30 every other year. Hoang claimed that the number of seminary students meets -- and would soon exceed -- the requirements for priests for the three provinces. Archbishop The agreed that the need for parish priests would soon be met, but mused that his government counterpart did not understand that priests do not just perform rites and rituals, but are also vital to charitable and humanitarian activities. He said the

Catholic Church still hoped to increase the number of seminarians in order to expand Church operations in these other areas.

15. (SBU) Following up on a U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) delegation's attempted visit to activist priest Father Phan Van Loi in January (ref B), Missionoffs asked Hoang about meeting with Loi. The request was met with mock confusion. Hoang claimed never to have heard of any priest by that name. When it was established that we did have the right to visit and speak with any private citizen, however, Mr. Hoang said that the CRA does not recognize Father Loi as a priest, but that nevertheless he would try to arrange an official visit if and when we returned to the region. Archbishop The commented later that, as Loi had been ordained in Bac Ninh province, Father Loi was "not affiliated with the diocese." The status of Father Nguyen Van Ly raised more serious concerns. Mr. Hoang said he wondered, "who controlled him," as Ly was a "threat to National Security" for his outspoken comments. Hoang claimed that Ly's imprisonment had nothing to do with his religious actions, but was a result of Ly's having used the pulpit "to lie about the government," and that he "tried to turn his parishioners against the government." He further claimed that the Catholic Church in Vietnam did not support Father Ly.

Catholic and Protestant leaders cautiously optimistic

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16. (SBU) Archbishop The gave a guardedly optimistic report about the Catholic Church's relationship with provincial authorities. Ten years ago, he said, the situation was very difficult. Now, "the practice of religious belief and religious study" are relatively unhindered. In general, Archbishop The said, they have a "cordial relationship" with the authorities, who are "becoming more cooperative." Problems remain, however, and he noted that "religious associations" -- for example women's and youth groups -- are still very restricted, and cannot meet and operate freely. He felt that bureaucracy and government red tape are the main obstacles to continuing improvement. For example, a charitable clinic at Kim Long staffed by Catholic nuns has had problems in receiving drugs before their expiration date. As they are generally donated just prior to this date, the delays in processing them through customs in Vietnam have led to whole shipments becoming unusable. Sister Nguyen Thi Dien, the director of the clinic, said she felt sure that there was no discrimination present in these delays, but that it was merely bureaucratic in nature. Archbishop The also noted that it took four years of consistent effort to receive approval to build a Catholic "Service Center" -- a conference and study center -- which was due to open very soon. The inaugural event for the center would be a conference for the Episcopal Council of Catholics April 26-28.

17. (SBU) Archbishop The did describe a number of outstanding disputes with the State over Church property. In Thien An, 107 hectares of Church land has apparently been seized, and is slated to be developed into an "amusement center," most likely a water park. Hoang of the CRA stated that, since the land was bought by the Church under the Diem regime, it is "subject to redistribution." Archbishop The said although this project is "environmentally questionable," the chances that the Church will get that land back are very slim. Archbishop The also talked about a church in Ke Sung, where a road is being built across parish land, very close to the front of the church building. Hoang said that the road was a necessary project given the province's overall plan for infrastructure development, but added that because the church at Ke Sung would be affected by this project, it would receive "preferential compensation". He noted that the church was not opposed to the road itself, but its concern revolved around safety issues, and the potential damage to the "spiritual environment." Speaking more broadly, Hoang likened the situation to the time period immediately following the American Revolution, saying that "in order to bring about equality in society" it was necessary to implement limited "land reform."

18. (SBU) Pastor Ma Phuc Hiep, of the government recognized Protestant Church in Hue, was largely positive in his comments. He noted the Protestant Church is small in Hue, with only 380 believers, and said that strong Buddhist traditions in the region made it difficult to attract new converts. He said that the CRA had been very fair, especially given the c's small numbers, and that Protestants have been able to pursue community outreach programs and some charitable work, although they would like to expand their charitable activities. The Church has facilitated three recent visits by doctors and chemists from overseas in order to hold medical clinics and perform operations. Their ability to do these kinds of charitable works, despite such a modest congregation, was due in part to donations from

Vietnamese Americans. Hiep noted that there were unrecognized Pentecostal congregations in Hue, but said he was not aware of any difficulties encountered by these house churches. When asked why he felt that Protestants were receiving such favorable treatment in comparison with some other religious groups, Pastor Hiep offered that "Protestants have not done anything to break the legal strictures," and therefore find themselves free to practice. Taking poloff and conoff on a private tour of his church, Hiep said that there had been "many problems with the Communists" in the past, but agreed that the situation had improved. (Note: It appears that Hiep felt more comfortable speaking to officers when the Embassy translator and other church members were not present. End Note)

Comment

19. (SBU) While the Catholics and Protestants appeared frustrated with the attitudes of local authorities, it appeared that both were taking an approach of patient cooperation in order to ensure their ability to operate. In the end, it seems many church leaders have come to the conclusion that while progress was slow -- at times glacial -- it was nonetheless progress, and they have chosen to focus on commonalities and cooperation in the belief that this would best serve their believers in the province.

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